

Alberta government opens water-sharing talks with large users amid worsening drought

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Body

Lance Colby saw what was coming.

The Alberta government said Wednesday it would open talks on water-sharing between large users as the province's drought situation worsens. But Colby, chairman of the Mountain View Regional Water Services Commission in central Alberta, had already begun such discussions.

"We're trying to get ahead of it," said Colby, whose group operates a treatment plant on the Red Deer River. "We're trying to figure out where the water's going, who the big users (are) and who's buying water.

"It's a lot of work." That work will be going on all over Alberta as the province faces slow desiccation. Alberta is heavily dependent on precipitation for its water supply, but Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada says the entire province is under at least a moderate drought, with large sections of the south under extreme and exceptionally dry conditions.

There are currently 51 water shortage advisories in the province. River basins from north to south face critical water shortages from low precipitation.

The Oldman River in the south is down to about a third of its normal flow. The Bow, which flows through Calgary, has half its normal water. Even tributaries to the Peace and Athabasca rivers, those mighty arteries of the north, are well off their averages.

"Alberta is considering a wide range of tools and approaches to respond to an emergency situation, including both regulatory and non-regulatory tools," said a letter from Environment Minister Rebecca Schulz to municipal leaders this week.

Schulz said the province's newly formed drought team will bring together major water users to negotiate agreements on sharing the resource. She said licence holders will be asked to voluntarily use less to ensure water is available for as many as possible.

It will be the first such effort in Alberta since 2001.

"The drought command team will select and prioritize negotiations with Alberta's largest water licence holders in an effort to secure significant and timely reductions in water use," Schulz wrote.

Paul McLauchlin of Rural Municipalities Alberta called the coming negotiations timely.

"It's very much the right move," he said. "This could be Year 1 of a 10-year drought."

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McLauchlin said the talks are likely to start off contentiously.

“You’re going to see some entrenchment of positions, some protectionism. And then you’re going to have that coupled with some stark realities.

“It would be hard to defend a water licence that far exceeds your historic water use.”

The Alberta Energy Regulator warned industry in December that it may have to plan to reduce its water use.

Agriculture and irrigation is by far the largest user of water in the province, accounting for almost half its water licences — mostly in the south, where water shortages are most acute. Municipalities and the energy industry, the next largest users, use about a quarter as much.

Schulz blames the drought on El Nino, a periodic system associated with warm, dry weather.

Her letter does not mention climate change.

But last summer, a group of scientists in her department published research that warned of hot, dry times to come.

“More extreme drought conditions were projected in Alberta under the (global mean temperature) warming, indicating that the extreme drought conditions are likely to become more common in Alberta,” says the paper, published in the Journal of Hydrology.

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